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Cooties

Gretchen Galbraith
Grand Valley State University

Kelly Parker
Grand Valley State University

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COOTIES

Gretchen Galbraith and Kelly Parker

This may come as a surprise to some coots and cootesses, but most of what Professor Cole says sounds awfully familiar to some of us cooties (*cootie*: diminutive of *arch.* coot or cootess). In fact, these are matters we new hires in Arts and Humanities tend to discuss quite a lot, once we get past the immediate questions that arise when one arrives at GVSU.

NEW COOTIE, JUST OFF PLANE: Where can I get the *New York Times*? What's my e-mail address? Don't these students know the difference between education and training?

ALMOST-TENURED COOTIE: No, they mostly don't, and it's even worse than that. Many don't read, few write very well, and some think liberal education is only for Democrats. I suspect that's why we've been brought here. Those elderly, smiling people over there with the cool briefcases evidently want us to help them do some educating.

NEW COOTIE: Sounds like something that starts fresh with every incoming class. Gee, I could make a career of this!

There are really only two points we would question in Professor Cole's portrayal of the situation at GVSU, circa 1995-96. The first concerns his comment implying that younger faculty are here "to make careers" and not "to build a university." How should we take this? On a charitable reading, this merely states the obvious. The efforts and tasks senior faculty faced when *they* arrived at the cornfield then known as GVSC were nicely described in the last issue of this *Review*. They amounted to "building a university" in the literal sense. We youth come not to a cornfield, but to a large institution with an established bureaucracy, a rich history of educational experience, and, well, a bunch of senior faculty who establish certain standards and expectations for us all. We would love to take on the kind of challenge the cootpersons faced thirty years ago. But some of us were in diapers thirty years ago, and the reality is that the tasks and opportunities we face as young faculty members today are significantly different from those earlier challenges.

A less charitable reading might detect some cynicism in Professor Cole's comment. We youth enjoy reduced teaching loads, and are actively involved in research, writing, conferencing, and the rest of the scholarly ratrace. In part, we have been trained to do these, through years of Skinnerian conditioning at some pretty good grad schools, but also they at least *seem* to be expected of us:

NEW COOTIE: So, what are the policies on research and publication? I know effective teaching is on top, but *how much* of *what* do I need to produce?

ALMOST-TENURED COOTIE: Nobody knows yet. Really. They're drafting a policy.

NEW COOTIE: When will this policy take effect? What weight will it carry?

ALMOST-TENURED COOTIE: It will take effect about the time you're up for tenure. We'll decide what weight it carries during your tenure review, if that's okay.

NEW COOTIE: Wow. Better safe than sorry, eh? Guess I better get to work. Where's the laser printer?

ALMOST-TENURED COOTIE: Over there. It even has an auto-deconstruct function that I've found very useful. Try out the dissertation-articulation subroutine, too. Just don't give anyone the impression your full energies aren't in the classroom.

The second point concerns Professor Cole's assertion that something is "going wrong" at GVSU. Indeed the direction has changed. Whatever happened to the aim of "becoming the finest undergraduate liberal arts institution in Michigan," anyway? We can no longer state our mission so simply. What about that idea that faculty should be here "to help students become interesting people, not politically-correct robots?" Students themselves will not and should not settle for such a simplistic goal. *Interesting* is easy. Interesting and well-equipped to undertake a constructive life's work is another matter. It's a matter involving not only good grounding in the humanities and sciences, but also some technical skills with film and video, or in technology even more complex than that! Has anyone even tried to *buy* carbon paper lately? Good luck! The globally accessible hypertext archive is here to replace it in everyday life.

The university we cooties find here in 1996 is a place of complex aims and demands. It is not enough to be a solid liberal arts college—that enterprise goes belly up, we're told. Not enough to help students become merely interesting people—they need to be liberally educated, multiculturally aware masters of high technology and classic literature. Not enough to commit ourselves to fine teaching—that teaching must dovetail with first-rate scholarly research and writing. Let us emphasize that we believe in these educational goals. Our concern here is not to challenge these noble ambitions, but to highlight the fact that the university that once was built is being built again from the inside. Sometimes this rebuilding goes in directions clearly charted out by elder cootepersons, but sometimes it must go in directions that are simply untried and unknown.

Has something gone badly wrong in this rebuilding? We don't see how anyone can tell yet. It certainly *could* go wrong easily enough, if young or old faculty forget that much of the educational mission here necessarily involves dislodging the narrow vocational mentality that so many of our students bring into the classroom. We do that best by teaching, researching, experimenting, and (re)building in the best GV tradition.

If students at GV are getting only "the illusion of an education," it is because many of them don't know what else to ask for, and we faculty have had a failure of nerve in compelling them to reach for more. It seems fair to ask *how* those students Professor Cole describes came to discover something in life beyond credit-card debt and what it buys. We suppose it might have happened in a classroom somewhere, and it doesn't matter *when* that teacher arrived at GVSU. Both the blame for failure and the credit for success in provoking real education ought to be distributed fairly, and not according to age.